MR. MARIONETTE

KATHLEEN COLVILE

Richmond Petits Bunz.

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from

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MR. MARIONETTE

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by

KATHLEEN COLVILE

with drawings by

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TO MY NEPHEW
MICHAEL

CHAPTER ONE

"Carnival"

THE great Carnival and Fair of Queer Town was in full swing. Every year when the sun was at its hottest, for seven days, the people went almost mad with excitement. Even the poorest feasted, for the King gave free banquets and an ox was roasted whole in the old Market Place. Everyone dressed up in different clothes and pretended to be someone else. The rich people drove through the town in decorated carriages, their horses bedecked with flowers, themselves robed in gorgeous clothing, but generally with their faces disguised by black velvet masks, or covered by long floating veils.

Everyone decorated the fronts of their houses with flags and banners, or by hanging Oriental

carpets from their windows, anything in fact that was gay or bizarre.

The poor people dressed themselves up too, for there are always paper caps and masks to be bought for a copper coin. And even if you have no money to spend you can always exchange clothes with someone else and so forget yourself in masquerading another. Just a rose stuck behind the ear or held in the mouth, even a little thing like that, will give you a sense of freedom and jollity.

The King's Minstrels drove round the town each evening on an open dray playing the liveliest airs. It was drawn by four piebald ponies with red harness, and bells at their heads.

There were wonderful stalls piled high with merchandise down the whole length of Turveydom Street, and over each stall was a huge coloured umbrella, red, blue or gold, and sometimes all these colours and more in one umbrella —a gay sight !

There were all kinds of side shows too at the Great Queer Town Fair, and these were held on the open heath outside the town on the north side. There were merry-go-rounds, and Cheap Jacks, and Punch and Judy shows, and fat ladies, and tiny dwarfs and all kinds of attractions, but the most popular of all the

tents was the one that held the show of the Marionettes. And not only was the show the most popular in the whole town, but the man who ran it, the man who worked the queer little figures from behind the scenes and made them dance, and made them speak, and made them sing, in fact gave them fictitious life, was the most popular man of the whole fair.

No one knew his real name, but everyone called him "Mr. Marionette." He travelled about the country in a covered cart drawn by two white mules, and with him went a white-faced solemn quiet little boy, who took the money at the tent door.

This little boy was called Willo, but whether it was short for "Will-o'-the-wisp" or not I can't tell you.

Although he was so slight and pale, and could easily, you would have thought, been pushed aside, or knocked down by the crowd, neither of these things ever did happen to him. He always secured the proper money from everyone who came to the performance of the Dancing Marionettes.

For Willo, in spite of his fragile appearance, had a certain strange dignity about him hard to define but impossible to ignore.

Mr. Marionette was not his father, but he

had known no other, for he had been found by the showman, when a baby, rolled up in a blanket among some sedges on the marsh lands, and had straightway been adopted by him. He shared his free and wandering life, like a son, but always called him "Master," as a term of affectionate respect, not of fear.

Mr. Marionette was certainly an artist, though he was so comical-looking you could only think of him in connection with jokes and pranks, with high days and holidays, with jingling tunes and childish merry-making.

He not only invented the plays for his puppets, the songs they sang, and the dances they danced, but he carved and painted the figures himself, made their clothes with needle and thread as well as any girl could have done, and even painted the wonderful scenery in front of which the Marionettes performed.

Mr. Marionette was a comical-looking little man with tight little brown curls all over his head, a very high forehead, small twinkling eyes and a yellowish skin all creased and puckered up with innumerable wrinkles. He looked as if he had laughed his way through life, and always under the hottest of suns.

Besides all his other accomplishments he must have been a bit of a ventriloquist, for he could

alter his voice for each character, sing soprano for the lady dolls, and baritone for the gentleman dolls. Yes, he was a remarkable little man was Mr. Marionette !

His tilt cart was covered with white canvas painted all over with queer animals and strange devices in bright colours. When people asked the showman what the pictures on his cart meant, he told them, with a chuckle, that it was his life's history in allegory. But they did not believe him for they never took him seriously, which was a great mistake, for the most comical people can be very serious sometimes. But whatever the painting on the outside of the cart meant, he carried a surprising number of things *inside*, or slung underneath, or strapped on to the little platform at the back. There was the big tent all folded up as small as it would go, and the stage platform, in pieces, and the scenery, and the box of dolls, and a small iron brazier for cooking, and two hammocks to be slung for their beds, and a flap table and two folding chairs, to say nothing of pots and pans, and tools and paints and a few old books, and to crown all, hung outside at the back was a cage with a green parrot in it.

The parrot's name was Popinjay, and it only lived in its cage when they were travelling, the

rest of the time it was either perched on Mr. Marionette's shoulder, or climbing about the cart getting into some sort of mischief. One of its favourite occupations was to tease the big mastiff dog Bruno, that followed the cart by day and slept under it at night.

Bruno was very jealous of Popinjay, and the parrot knew this only too well. When he was on their master's shoulder, he mocked at the dog, calling out, "Lie down, Bruno! Bad dog!" And then in crooning tones to the showman, "Give us a kiss," pushing its beak into his mouth and then laughing derisively at the dog. Willo did not like Popinjay. He feared the bird for the sly pecks it would give him, also he resented its treatment of Bruno, to whom the boy was devoted.

Bruno always sat straight up beside Willo when he was taking the money at the tent door. If the eager crowd tried to push into the tent too quickly, or there was any trouble about the money, the dog had only to give a low threatening growl, for order to be instantly restored.

When the children of Queer Town saw the brightly painted tilt cart coming along the road and heard the jingling of the mules' bells, they called to each other in glee, "Look! look! here comes Mr. Marionette. The fair will soon

begin now. Hark! hark! listen to the mules' bells! See, Willo leads them through the town. Hurrah for Mr. Marionette and his dancing dolls!"

Now Mr. Marionette, although he was so popular, had an enemy, or perhaps I ought to say, *because* he was so popular he had an enemy. A rival. The Punch and Judy man, Finney. Finney hated Mr. Marionette with all the strength he had in his nasty, mean, spiteful nature. He hated him for his talent, he hated him for his merry laugh, and above all he hated him for his success at the fairs. For whatever fairs Mr. Marionette travelled to, there, sure enough, would be Finney's Punch and Judy show.

Now Finney had quite a good show and some fine dolls, and made quite a lot of money, but he was never satisfied. He was always jealous of the crowds of people that poured into the tent of the Marionettes, and he vented his jealous fury on his poor, meek little wife, and on his still poorer and meeker little white befrilled dog Toby. He was a bully was Finney, and the very sight of Mr. Marionette's painted cart coming along the road on which he was journeying, stirred up his worst passions. He would shout and swear at his wife, and kick his donkey to give vent to his horrible temper.

"Ah, my heart and liver!" he would exclaim. "Ah, my beard and whiskers! Here comes that vile swindler, that outrageous trickster, that grinning clown. Bah! he ought not to be allowed to sully this fair countryside, him and his dingy dolls. Bah!!" And he would lash out at his poor little donkey who was patiently drawing the Punch and Judy box along on a two-wheeled barrow, or give his wife a nasty pinch on her poor thin arm.

He was an ugly man with his dirty red beard and long uncombed hair hanging round his neck. He wore an old crimson coat down to his ankles decorated with tarnished braid, and on his head a sort of military-looking cocked hat with a bright red feather in it. He was the sort of figure to frighten bad children with. A fat-nosed gargoyle of a man with a cruel mouth.

Now Mr. Marionette knew quite well that Finney hated him most bitterly, but it was not till this particular Queer Town Fair that things reached a climax.

As Queer Town was both the capital and the chief port of Queer country, of course the great Carnival and Fair held there was by far the most important of the whole countryside, and Mr. Marionette and Willo reckoned to

make twice as much money there than at any of the other fairs throughout the year.

They had arrived the night before and were now busy erecting the large tent. It was no easy task for one man and a boy to do this, but from much practice they knew just how to set about it, and there was generally some good-natured man from one of the other side shows who would give them a helping hand, for Mr. Marionette was popular with everyone.

A strong young man from one of the merry-go-rounds was now helping them by pulling on to the ropes.

"Do you see who's alongside of you, Mister?" he asked with a grin; "that old red fox Finney. I doubt he's done it on purpose. He hopes to drown you with his drum and fife, I expect. A rare old cuss for noise, he is."

Mr. Marionette grinned cheerfully. "He's welcome to make as much noise as he likes," he rejoined; "the heath is free to all, but there's something more to my little people than just noise."

He always referred to his puppets as his "Little People." There seemed to be a real bond of union between them.

"Oh, master," exclaimed Willo, pausing to take breath between hammering in the tent

pegs, "*how* I wish I had a drum too, or a trumpet or a cornet, or anything with which I could make a noise that would be greater than the noise of the Red Fox."

"That is nonsense," replied his master, "we have something greater than the loudest brass band by which to attract the people. We have Art, and there is still enough vision in Queer Town for the people to love true art. It is only childish to drown noise by more noise."

But Willo was not convinced; he still longed for some loud musical instrument to play on while standing at the door of the tent.

Why should old Finney have all the fun, parading up and down in front of his show, in that ridiculous long red coat, thumping on his drum and tootling on his fife! It was maddening! and so he told Bruno, to whom he confided all his joys and sorrows and all his longings, however hopeless.

The first night of the show everything went splendidly. The tent was crowded for each performance. Mr. Marionette had composed a new play, with an entirely new set of scenery and dresses for his "Little People." It was thrilling and the audience applauded with delight. No matter how loudly the Red Fox beat his drum, the crowds round the Punch and

Judy show were never half as large as those that poured into the tent of the Marionettes.

The next evening Willo and his master were having a hurried tea, seated at the little flap table inside their cart. Bruno was sitting up just outside at the foot of the steps ready to catch any bit that might be thrown to him.

"If you've finished your tea, Willo," said Mr. Marionette, "just get me out my box of puppets, will you. I've got to mend the skirt of the Duchess. It was torn last night when she was escaping from the chief of the robbers."

"Yes, master, I have finished," said Willo, and he ran down the steps, for the long box of dolls was kept slung on iron bars, under the cart. In a second he was back again, white and scared.

"Oh, master! It has gone! It is not there!"

"Nonsense," said the showman, "why I locked the box and put it back there myself after the show last night. It *must* be there." He spoke with conviction, but in spite of that he bustled down the steps pretty quickly to see for himself.

No! the box was not there. Willo was right. It was too big a thing to be mistaken about. Master and boy gazed at each other in consternation. In less than an hour the first performance

was due to begin. The same thought was in both their minds. Old Finney must have robbed them.

"The Red Fox!" exclaimed Willo, "he must have stolen the puppets! Shall I go and see, master?"

Now this was very brave of Willo, for he was small and slight and Finney was strong and very fierce.

"Steady on," said his master, "we must be careful. We have no *proof* that he has taken the box. If we had any proof I would go to the Civil Guard and have him arrested. If we go to him now and accuse him of the theft, of course he will deny it, and we have no right to search his tent. He cannot escape us for he is sure to stay the Fair out. All our thoughts now must be for the show to-night. If Finney has stolen my box of puppets, the best way of paying him out is to have the performance to-night, as though nothing unfortunate had happened."

"But, master," burst out Willo in astonishment, "how *can* you have a show without your 'Little People'? A marionette show without marionettes! It is impossible! Unless, master, you have other puppets in hiding somewhere."

"No, Willo," replied the showman, "I have no other puppets than the ones you know of.

My wooden players have gone, but there are still live players. We will contrive to amuse the company without my marionettes."

And so they did—in the most remarkable way too.

To begin with, the showman made such a comical speech about his leading lady being ill, that it put the audience in a good temper at once. Then, on the spur of the moment, Mr. Marionette had invented a funny little play in which the characters were himself, Willo (disguised as a pretty girl), Bruno (with a wolf's mask), and even Popinjay was pressed into their service to take a part. There had only been time for one hurried rehearsal, but genius scoffs at difficulties, and Mr. Marionette had true genius. In the course of half an hour he impersonated four different characters. As an old witch he was splendid. You would have said he had never played another part in his life till you had seen him as a pirate, but he was equally good as a pathetic old beggar man, and finally as the heroine's old mother he made the audience fairly rock with laughter. Willo, though very shy and nervous, made a charming girl, and sang quite prettily, though he (or she) did not say much.

The people who had poured into the tent to

see a marionette show went away at the end of an hour fully satisfied, though they had not seen a single marionette! And not only that, but they came again and brought their friends.

Three times more that evening was the tent filled to overflowing. Though Finney might beat his drum and blow his fife till his cheeks became nearly as red as his hair, he could not turn one single person away from the tent door to behold the antics of his Punch and Judy.

All that night when preparing for bed Willo and his master had final and complete proof of who the thief was who had stolen their box of dolls. It was Popinjay, the parrot, who gave them a clue.

Pushing his beak through the bars of his cage, he exclaimed in a husky whisper in the very tones of Finney—

"Oh, my beard and whiskers—oh law! Oh, drat the box," and then over and over again, "Oh law! My beard and whiskers. Oh law! Oh, law!"

Now how could Popinjay have heard this unless Finney had been close to the caravan? besides, they knew this was one of his favourite expressions. It must have been whilst trying to drag out the doll box, unseen and unheard, that

he had given vent to his exasperation in these words.

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Mr. Marionette, "*that* rather gives the thing away, doesn't it, Willo? To-morrow morning we will beard the lion, or rather the fox, in his den, and demand our property back from him, on pain of instant imprisonment."

But, alas! before the morning came, their plans were to be frustrated.

CHAPTER TWO

"Pursuit"

VERY early next morning Willo sat up in his hammock rubbing his eyes. He knew something exciting was afoot, but for the moment he couldn't remember what it was. Then it all flashed back to him. The stolen dolls and the Red Fox.

He never took long to dress, but that morning he was quicker than ever. He ran down the caravan steps to light the brazier fire ready for their breakfast. He always got things going before he woke up his master, but this morning, before he could collect the wood and peat for the fire, all thought of his duties was knocked clean out of his head by the great shock he received. For raising his eyes to where Finney's Punch and Judy show, his tent and his little

donkey-cart *should* have been, he saw to his horror that the whole caboodle had gone !

Vanished as if by magic ! How *could* it have happened ? At twelve o'clock last night they had been there—at 5.30 this morning they were all gone. Amazing spectacle ! Now, indeed, there was no doubt of Finney's guilt. Why else should he have left the Great Queer Town Fair while in full swing ? Bursting with excitement Willo dashed back into the caravan, and shaking his master wildly by the arm, he cried :

" They're gone ! Gone clean away, master. The rogues ! Oh, come ! come quick, and look ! "

" Hullo there ! Steady on," exclaimed Mr. Marionette, sitting up in his hammock and rubbing his arm; " don't pinch my arm off, Willo. Whatever is the matter, my boy ? " For Willo stood there, his hair wild and unbrushed, panting with excitement, and his brown eyes round with astonishment.

" It's Finney," he shouted; " he's gone, I tell you, clean away—wife, tent, show, dog and donkey, all bolted in the night ! "

At this surprising piece of news Mr. Marionette leapt from his hammock, and leaning over the half-door, stared, still half bewildered by sleep, at the strip of trampled, muddy ground

which yesterday had formed the pitch of Finney's "Magnificent Punch and Judy Show."

There was no mistake about it, the thief had indeed flown, bag and baggage; he had crept away silently, stealthily, while they all slept.

"Oh, master! what shall we do?" said Willo.

"Follow them, of course," replied his master, with prompt cheerfulness. "In less than half an hour we must be upon the road, after them, and if my mules can't soon overtake his miserable half-starved little donkey, I'll eat my Sunday hat, feather and all!"

"But, master, the tent!" exclaimed Willo; "how can we get the tent down and packed away in that time? Why it takes us a couple of hours or more at the best of times."

"Go to, boy, and don't fuss," replied his master; "I did not mention the tent. That we leave here, also the cart. We ride on the mules with saddlebags for provisions in case we are some time upon the chase. Foxes have a way of doubling upon their tracks sometimes, and their holes are many. Bruno will run behind us, but Popinjay I will leave behind, in the charge of our friend the Merry Dwarf. Now, no more talk, but light the fire and prepare a meal. I will saddle the mules and pack up some food. I hope before the evening to be back again here with

my Little People once more safely in my keeping, and what's more, in time for the evening performance of the " Famous Marionettes."

Willo, knowing very well when his master was in earnest, ran around in double quick time to prepare their breakfast and make ready for the road. He was thoroughly excited too, for here was something new ; to be riding upon the mules without the cart or any heavy baggage. To be setting out on an adventurous quest in pursuit of a rogue and vagabond, on the free high road. What boy would not have thrilled to the idea !

Mr. Marionette was indeed a master to be proud of. He always did the dashing, the unexpected thing, never the dull, the prudent, the unimaginative. To live with him was an adventure in itself.

Behold the two, man and boy, half an hour later, riding along the white ribbon of a road, that stretched for miles across the unbroken heath. The sun was not yet too hot, and a gentle wind encouraged them onward. They seemed alone in the world, for once they had left the neighbourhood of the fair well behind them, they met no living soul.

Mr. Marionette rode first in his brown full-skirted coat, long buff waistcoat and neat brown

hose. On his light brown curls he wore a little round cap, in which was jauntily stuck one of Popinjay's green and red feathers.

Willo was dressed in what had once been a bright blue uniform coat with silver buttons. It was now faded to a pale grey blue, patched and worn, but the buttons still shone brightly. His master saw to that, for Mr. Marionette was very particular that everything about him should be clean and " ship-shape," as he called it. Dirt and muddle he could not stand. The mules were clean and well groomed, their harness bright and shining.

" You must look prosperous if you are to succeed," said Mr. Marionette; " once let yourself go and there will be plenty to kick you further down the hill." Finally the big dog brought up the rear.

When they had been jogging along for over an hour, Willo suddenly said :

" Why, master, should you suppose that the thieves have taken *this* road, rather than any other ? "

" I will tell you, my boy," said Mr. Marionette; " the next fair is to be held at Santeen, which, as you know, is ten miles on the other side of the heath. Now, as Finney has chosen to miss half of the great Queer Town Fair, I

don't suppose he can afford to miss the next one too; and yet, of course, he may not have left Queer Town at all, but be skulking somewhere round its back streets. Leaving, as they did, in the dark, no one I asked round about the fair had seen or heard a sound of their departure. The first person I see I shall question, but the road seems strangely deserted. Everyone who can possibly be there is in Queer Town this week, enjoying the carnival."

They rode on another two miles in silence, then the road began to dip downwards and the rough land gave place to fields. The descent grew steeper, and they heard the sound of running water. At the foot of the hill there was an old stone bridge which crossed a wide, shallow but swift stream.

On the other side of the bridge stood an inn, The Silver Fish, one well known to all travellers to and from Queer Town.

It was a low, whitewashed building, quadrangular in shape, with an arched doorway leading into the inner courtyard. Here a fountain played. It was in the form of a huge fish, standing on its tail, and the water spouted from its mouth and fell into a basin beneath, where brown fish with red spots swam round and round.

There was also a large fig tree, the lower branches of which were supported by a kind of twisted wooden fence and under the shade of which were stone benches and little tables, for here the travelling merchants and pedlars, the showmen, and even the vagrants who had a few coppers for red wine would gather together, for it was the coolest spot for miles around. Here the news was discussed, and those coming from the port of Queer Town would tell of vessels newly arrived there, loaded with the richest merchandise from across the seas, and of incredible bargains to be struck with their bronzed captains, by those skilled in the game of barter and chance.

It was in front of this inn, with great hopes of gaining the information they were seeking, that Mr. Marionette and Willo now drew rein, and slipping from their saddles led their mules into the refreshing, water-cooled atmosphere of the courtyard. Mr. Marionette was rather disappointed to see only a few men, and those not very promising-looking subjects for his purpose, seated under the shade of the huge fig tree.

There were a couple of sailors sprawling, half asleep, against the tree trunk, their scarlet caps all awry on their heads, an empty jug and

a broken tankard proving that they had already drunk heavily.

On a further bench three miserable-looking beggar-men in tatters shared the contents of a single tankard between them. The fact of the middle one being blind did not in the least prevent him from insisting violently on his having his full share of the wine.

With one contemptuous glance at the tipsy sailors, Mr. Marionette approached the three rascally-looking beggars.

"Morning, comrades," he hailed them cheerfully; "a hot and dusty morning indeed for three good fellows to be sharing from one tankard. Now I'll wager you one apiece would not come amiss. "Landlord," he called lustily, "three tankards of good red wine for these gentlemen here, and a fourth in which I can drink their health."

As he expected, the wine soon loosened the beggars' tongues, and by degrees Mr. Marionette worked up to his subject.

"You say you have come from Santeen and are walking to Queer Town," he said; "well, I wonder if you have passed a friend of mine on the road, one 'Finney,' who plies the trade of Punch and Judy man?"

The sightless beggar nudged the man on his

right hand and muttered something in his ear. The third man, in a whining tone which had become second nature to him, drawled out: "Now let me see. 'Finney.' Is it him with a red beard and a wife like a scared hen?"

"The same," said Mr. Marionette; "did you chance to pass him on the road?"

"'Twas at the dingle we passed them by," he replied. "They were camping there, or resting, or something. At any rate it was not yet fully light and they had a great roaring fire going you could see for half a mile along the road, and a prime smell of something cooking in their pot. A duck, I should reckon. But when we drew near and asked for a bite or even a bone or two to suck, do you think he gave us any? Why he didn't even know how to speak civilly to gentlemen of the road. Curse him and his paltry show, says I, not Punch himself has an uglier mug than that red-headed showman."

"I agree with you, friend," said Mr. Marionette, "most heartily do I agree with you. An ugly face and an ugly heart he has too. And how long ago would it be that you left them in the dingle?"

"Well, 'twas just before daybreak," replied the second beggar, "and now the sun is hot

enough to parch one's throat, so I reckon 'twould be nearly five hours ago."

Ignoring this hint for more wine, Mr. Marionette thanked the men, and having shared his tankard with Willo, proceeded to lead the mules once more out upon the high road.

The dingle of which the men had spoken lay about a couple of miles beyond the inn, just where four cross-roads met, and was a favourite camping ground for gipsies and the like. They trotted along a little way in silence, Bruno at their heels. Then Willo, as though he could restrain his thoughts no longer, burst out:

"Oh, master! I doubt me the worst has happened! Directly that beggar-man spoke of a roaring great fire, it flashed upon me all in a minute,—'they have burned the puppets!' Your Little People are no more. There in the dingle they lit a huge bonfire and burned them, box and all! What could be easier? And once destroyed there would be no evidence against them!"

"A gloomy and a hopeless idea, Willo," said his master. "Now, no such dread thought entered my mind, but only a feeling of relief that we have tracked them thus far. Of course you *may* be right, and then our further pursuit of the culprits is useless, but I prefer to think

otherwise. Having stolen a duck, they lit a good fire to cook it by. If they had intended to burn my marionettes they need not have travelled so far before doing it, but have made a fire a mile or two along the heath and returned to the fair in time for the evening performance. In fact they need never have taken the donkey and cart, or their outfit with them at all, but Finney himself could have carried my box of puppets unaided and alone."

Willo, with a deep sigh, and no sign of hope on his face, replied, "I only *hope* you are right, master," and relapsed into gloomy silence.

At the dingle they again drew rein. It was an overgrown, disused quarry, a hundred yards or so back from the cross-roads. Before dismounting they could see the white ashes of a camp fire, at the bottom of the dell.

Yes, the beggar had told them the truth. On closer examination Mr. Marionette found some of the duck's feathers, and a bit of tarnished gold braid sticking to a gorse bush which he recognised as having been torn off Finney's old coat. Holding it up, he exclaimed:

"This is proof that the Red Fox has indeed been here, but where he has gone to now is another matter."

Willo, who had walked a few yards along the

main road, called out, "Look, master! the tracks of the donkey-cart. I see them in the dust here quite clearly. They must have gone on to Santeen."

"Good boy," cried his master, joining him on the road. "Yes, there are the marks of his little two-wheeled cart, but the question is had he the box of marionettes still with him? Let us first search all round the dingle to be sure he has not hidden them there."

They searched well and thoroughly, Willo even crawling into a kind of cave-like opening in the side of the quarry, but no box was to be found.

"I think we had better follow the main road on to Santeen," said Mr. Marionette, and they were just mounting their mules when Willo exclaimed, pointing at the dog:

"Just look at Bruno!" He was certainly behaving in an odd way; after violently sniffing round some rough grass at the edge of the road he had started off down the side lane on the left, nose to ground, looking over his shoulder from time to time, as much as to say, "I'm on the right scent, aren't you coming with me?"

"See, master, Bruno thinks they have gone that way, I'm sure," went on the boy excitedly; "what are we to do?"

"And yet the wheel tracks clearly point to Santeen," said his master, rubbing his curly head as he always did when perplexed. "Of course it is possible," he went on, "that they may have divided and Finney have gone on to the next fair, and his wife have tramped back into the town; but if so, why should she not have gone back the way they had come? This side road goes to a little hamlet by the Wonderway river, called Mistell, where they cultivate flowers for the Queer Town market. It's about five or six miles from here, and although you *can* get back to Queer Town that way, it's a good seven or eight miles further than over the heath, and a bad round-about road."

"Perhaps they have some friends or relations at Mistell," suggested Willo, "and might leave the box with them. But if so, which of them took it there? the Red Fox or his wife? It would be too heavy, though, for the woman to be carrying."

"A little thing like that wouldn't trouble Finney," replied Mr. Marionette; "he always uses that woman as much as a beast of burden as he does his ass! Most likely, if they really *did* divide up here, he went on to Santeen, as the woman never works the Punch and Judy show, I know. But what proof have we that the man

MISTELL
GANTSEIN

did not take the stolen box of puppets too? The woman may have gone off to Mistell on some totally different errand."

"But see how eager Bruno is," said Willo, "he must know something."

"Well, look here," replied his master, "let us, too, divide. You follow Bruno and see where he will lead you, and I will pursue the Red Fox on to Santeen."

So this they decided to do, and first we will follow Willo and Bruno on their quest.

CHAPTER THREE

"Willo's Quest"

THE road that Willo now took was much narrower than the high road, and a more attractive way, being winding, shady and mostly downhill. Also it was new to Willo, which always makes a way more interesting. All the main roads of the country, for miles round, he knew well, but branch roads and lanes leading to small villages and hamlets, being of no use to Mr. Marionette from a business point of view, were unknown to the boy.

Bruno, instead of trotting at the mule's heels, as he had done before, was well ahead of Willo, nose to ground, keen on some scent. Whether it was the scent of Finney or his wife, or merely of some rabbit-skin seller, who could tell? Only Willo, having much faith in Bruno's

cleverness, trusted implicitly that he would eventually lead him to the lost dolls.

Although Willo was very fond of his master, he found the novelty of being alone on the road rather exhilarating. It made him feel so important being allowed to continue the search unaided. To think that at any bend of the road he might come upon Finney with the stolen box ! What a thrilling thought this was ! But what he would do if it actually occurred, he hadn't the slightest idea ! Finney was a man, and strong, and Willo was only a boy and rather weak; how could he, unarmed, attack the Punch and Judy man ?

But then there was Bruno—with Bruno to back him up, anything was possible. If Willo cried " Hold him," Bruno would jump upon the back of the Red Fox and pin him to the ground.

With this consoling thought, Willo rode cheerfully forward. He was getting very hungry, but did not want to stop for food till he reached Mistell. The last two miles of the way were down a steep hill, and he kept catching glimpses of the Wonderway river shining beneath him in the valley.

Mistell, which was a very pretty village, seemed half under water, for here the river was directed

into a series of tiny canals for irrigation purposes. These narrow waterways crossed and criss-crossed each other, cutting up the land into countless little islands. Most of these islands were ablaze with bright flowers—magnolias, lilies, roses and countless other beautiful blossoms. The cottages were round, and, being thatched with light straw, had the appearance of gigantic beehives.

Some of the islands were joined together by miniature bridges, arched to allow the small boats to pass under them, for nearly all the market gardeners had boats of their own, for living in this kind of village they had to be as much at home upon the water as upon the land.

As Willo now descended upon this island village, it seemed ablaze with light and colour. All the inhabitants were particularly busy that day, gathering flowers for the famous flower market of Queer Town, that display of floral beauty that was held each year on the fifth day of the great carnival.

The men, clad in blue belted blouses, with bare feet and shady rush hats, were cutting the flowers and packing them in large shallow baskets. These were stacked in the small boats, which in their turn were being rowed out to a large flat-bottomed sailing barge which was

moored to a wooden jetty. This barge, when fully loaded, would sail down the river to the port of Queer Town.

The women and the children were all hard at work too, for this was the last barge to call, that day, at the Mistell jetty. The whole scene was indescribably gay and busy, but Willo wondered how in the midst of all this activity he was going to make inquiries for the Punch and Judy man and the stolen dolls. All these people were far too busy over their own affairs to trouble about old Finney or his brow-beaten wife.

Deciding that it would be best for him to have his dinner first, and make inquiries afterwards, Willo slid to the ground, and hitching the mule's bridle over a tree stump, seated himself on a grassy bank by the roadside. He had brought some food with him in his saddle-bag, which he now shared with Bruno.

Just as he was finishing he heard approaching footsteps, and looking up, saw, to his great joy, a well-known figure coming along the by road that led from the jetty. This was none other than Tom Tittler, the pedlar, commonly known throughout the whole countryside as "Tom Tit," and quite a pal of Mr. Marionettes'. Many a lift had the old chap been given in their covered cart, for Tom Tit travelled the country

from end to end, selling his laces, ribbons and bright trinkets for the women and girls, and funny little dancing toys on strings, and tiny little carts and horses carved out of nutshells to delight the children's hearts.

But, unlike Mr. Marionette, Tom Tittler the pedlar travelled the byways as well as the high roads and was known in every village and hamlet, and even in the most remote farmhouses or lonely windmills. His jolly, sunburned face and blue twinkling eyes were ever a welcome sight. He wore no head covering but his own silver locks brushed back from his high pink forehead. He always had some cheery tale to tell or exciting bit of gossip to impart, and never seemed sad or cross with anyone about anything whatever. The large pack on his back gave him almost the appearance of a humpback, but his nimble legs, encased in close-fitting black hose and soft buckled shoes, carried him over many miles of country in a day, in spite of the weight he carried.

"Hullo, Willo!" he now called cheerily, catching sight of the little group, boy, mule and dog, by the roadside. "Where is your good master, and where is the cart and Orlando?" (This was the name of the other mule, the one Willo was riding was Miranda.)

"Oh, Mr. Tittler," exclaimed Willo, jumping up excitedly, "I *am* glad to see you. Perhaps you can help me in my quest. We have suffered a loss, my master and I. The box of marionettes has been stolen from us."

"Dear, dear, dear! You don't say so!" exclaimed the old pedlar; then loosening his pack and letting it slide to the ground, he went on: "Come, tell me all about it, my boy, I will sit here beside you and rest awhile. The good folks down there," nodding towards the village, "are too busy just now to attend to me and my wares. When this boat has gone they will have time to inspect my fal-lals."

Only too glad to have such a sympathetic listener to whom to unburden his mind, Willo poured out the whole tale of Finney's theft, finishing up with, "And have you seen either him or his wife pass by this way? Bruno has led me here, and I'm sure there is no wiser dog in the land."

The old man nodded his head in agreement, and patting the big dog's head, said: "Yes, Bruno is wise, and he is right this time, too, for I saw that miserable woman Mrs. Finney only a few hours ago, and on her back she carried a big package, that might well have been your box, wrapped up in an old striped blanket and

strapped on to her back. The poor, half-starved looking soul was bent almost double under it."

"You saw her!" exclaimed Willo, jumping on to his feet in excitement, "and only a few hours ago! Which way did she go? Tell me quick and I will soon overtake her," and he caught hold of the mule's bridle, preparing to mount.

"Hold hard there, my boy," said the pedlar. "Hold hard a minute! You won't catch her as easily as all that, for the woman left on the earlier boat for Queer Town. I saw her boarding it myself, and that must be a good two hours since. She will be in the town by now."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" cried Willo, "what a shame, I've missed her. I cannot take the mule on this boat, and my master says it's a long and winding road round into Queer Town from here. By the time I get there the woman may have hidden the puppets anywhere, *anywhere*," he repeated with tragic despair. "Or even," he added hopelessly, flinging himself down again on the green bank, "have dropped them into the deepest part of the river."

"Cheer up, sonny," said the old man, "if she had meant to sink the box in the river she need not have gone on the boat at all. There are plenty of quiet places here where she could have

lowered the box into the water, unseen. There is still hope that you may recover the puppets for your master, if we can trace the woman's movements on landing, and I will give you a tip as to where you *might* possibly find her, and them. Mark you, I don't say it's certain, or even very likely, but it's a chance, if you care to follow it up."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, sir!" exclaimed Willo, and his despondent face lighted up once more.

"Now you know," said the pedlar, "that in the coldest winter months I do not travel the roads, but remain in Queer Town. There I carve my little toys, buy in my stock of laces, etc., and prepare for the warmer months."

"Yes, yes," broke in Willo, somewhat impatiently. He could not see what all this rigmarole had got to do with the lost marionettes. But the old man would not be hurried.

"Yes," he went on quietly, "I hire a room, just a poor humble place but with a fire and a bed in it, and there I live and work for a month or two. Now in this same house where I rent a room, there lives at the very tip top of the house, like a crow in its nest, a very old woman. Now this old woman is some relation of Finney's, either his mother or grandmother, I can't say which.

'Mother Toothey,' they call her. Times again I've seen that red-headed rogue come up our stairs and pass on to the attic where that old crone lives. Well," he went on, turning to the boy, "now you see what I'm driving at. *Perhaps,* mark you, I only say *perhaps,* Mrs. Finney is carrying that stolen box of puppets to hide in that old woman's room. Anyhow, that's the tip for what it's worth."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Willo, almost as fervently as though the box of dolls was already within his grasp, "I'll go there at once, thank you, Mr. Tittler," and scrambling on to the back of Miranda, in another moment he would have been off if the Tom Tit had not held up a restraining hand.

"Gently does it, my boy! Gently does it," he said. "Now how do you know where to find this old crone of Finney's? Queer Town's a big place, and the streets and by-lanes are many." Willo drew rein, and looked so blank and crestfallen that Mr. Tittler burst into a roar of laughter.

"Oh, youth, youth!" he exclaimed, "so impetuous, so irresponsible"; then sobering down again, "Listen to me," he said; "you must follow the line of the lower quay side till you come to a small square with a lanthorn

swinging above the archway leading into it. At the corner of this square there is a narrow flight of steps leading into a smaller square above, and the house I mean is the oldest one in that square. Upper Lanthorn Square it is called."

"Yes, yes, I will soon find it," replied the boy, gathering up the reins, but in reality he had barely listened to the old man's explanations, so terribly eager was he to be off.

Calling to Bruno, who now seemed content to follow at the mule's heels, Willo started off at a smart trot in the direction of Queer Town. For some time the road ran by the riverside, then it wound inland skirting the marshes, finally it began to rise gradually, and after many turns and twists, very trying to Willo's impatient frame of mind, it circled the high walls of the palace grounds. This was where one lost so much ground in going to Queer Town by that route.

The dusk was beginning to fall as Willo rode into the outskirts of the town. As he was rather nearer to the fair ground than he was to the region of the port, he thought he might as well ride first to their camping ground, give the mule some food, and leave both her and Bruno there while he went on in search of Finney's old mother. He knew Miranda must be both tired

and hungry, and his master was always most particular that his animals should be well looked after. Even in the greatest emergency the animals must never be neglected.

Before he was ready to start it was nearly dark, so he had to carry a lantern with him.

But before we follow him on the last phase of his quest, we must return to follow the adventures of Mr. Marionette.

CHAPTER FOUR

"The Quest of Mr. Marionette"

FOR some time after Willo had left him Mr. Marionette jogged along the road in deep thought, but without meeting a living soul. From time to time he could still follow the tracks of the two-wheeled cart in the thick white dust of the roadway, proving that one or other of the Finneys was still ahead of him.

All the roads round Queer Town were very quiet just then owing to the great carnival. But after riding in solitude under a burning sun for over an hour, Mr. Marionette at last saw in the distance some moving figures coming towards him.

As he drew nearer to them he saw it was a party of mendicant friars in their coarse brown cassocks, with bare feet and shaven crowns.

They walked with bowed heads, telling their beads. There was nothing about them to encourage conversation, but Mr. Marionette, nevertheless drew rein, and doffing his brown cap, very politely, said :

" Honoured Fathers, may I ask you if you have passed a Punch and Judy showman with a two-wheeled cart and a small ass along the road ? "

The first six friars (there were seven in all) passed by without any regard to his question whatever, their heads still bowed, their lips moving in prayer, but the seventh and last one, either from motives of pity or because he was a tiny bit more worldly disposed than the others, looked up at Mr. Marionette as he passed, and nodding his head slightly, pointed back along the road the way they had come.

With a smile of thanks, for to have spoken would have been to betray the monk's lapse of behaviour to his brethren, Mr. Marionette, with renewed hope, rode on his way towards Santeen.

At the next bend of the road he came upon an old thatched barn standing back a little way from the road up a grassy lane.

" That looks an inviting spot for a siesta," said Mr. Marionette out loud, " cool and quiet," and he looked longingly at the old barn, and

then at the hot dusty road stretching before him. "I will leave it to you, Orlando, to decide; which shall it be, my mule?" and he dropped the reins on to the mule's neck. Orlando, remembering a certain comfortable inn stable in Santeen where he had been put up before, decided on the high road, and breaking into a smart trot soon left the old barn far behind.

But if Mr. Marionette had happened to look back over his shoulder before he turned that fatal corner he would have seen a sight that would have quickly changed his plans!

For peering round the doorway of that old lichen-covered shed he would have seen a well-known face. That big nose, those slanting eyes, and that straggling red beard could belong to none other than the Punch and Judy man himself.

Finney grinned with malicious pleasure as he saw the back of Mr. Marionette rising and falling to the trot of the mule, disappearing round the corner, evidently bound for Santeen.

"Ta, ta! my love," he called derisively, waving a dirty hand at the retreating back. "Hope you'll enjoy Santeen." Then withdrawing himself into the interior of the dark shed where stood his donkey and laden cart, he caught hold roughly of the animal's bridle and

pulled it through the wide doorway up the grassy lane, and out on to the blazing high road.

Mr. Finney had had his sleep and a good feed, and he cared nothing for the feelings of his donkey, who had had nothing to eat that day. Turning his head, not toward Santeen, but in the opposite direction, he urged the ass on with the help of a long, sharp-pointed stick, with which he alternately whacked and prodded him, as his fancy directed.

" Ha, ha ! " he chuckled, perched on the top of the overcrowded cart. " Before this evening I shall be back in Queer Town, having trailed my red herring of a false scent for that fool of a Mr. Marionette to follow at his pleasure. There will be a fine crowd round Finney's Punch and Judy show at the fair to-night. Ha, ha ! by my beard and whiskers, I shall rake in the money ! No blithering dancing marionettes to spoil my chances, no capering clown of a Mr. Marionette to fool the public into his old tent. Ha, ha ! my fine fellow, you and your Willo ! You won't catch me in a hurry. You will never find your box of mangy dolls again ! "

But quite unconscious of what he had missed by the mule's decision, Mr. Marionette rode gaily on his way, humming snatches of song

and looking about him with pleased interest, as he drew nearer to the outskirts of Santeen.

"I will first ride to the inn of the 'Golden Goose,'" he thought, "for there my good Orlando can have food and rest, and then, after having some refreshment myself, I will go round the town on foot making inquiries. I have many good friends in Santeen, and they cannot all have journeyed to the Queer Town carnival. If old Finney is not on the fair ground, I have little doubt but that I shall find him in one of his old haunts."

These plans he carried out to the letter, which was unfortunate, for, as we know, by so doing he gave Finney a good two hours' start of him on the road back to Queer Town. For it was to that dusty high road Mr. Marionette finally returned, after having sought in vain, in every nook and cranny of Santeen, for the sly Punch and Judy man.

"If he is not in Santeen, and apparently neither he nor his wife have been near there to-day, then he must still be lurking round the neighbourhood of Queer Town," argued Mr. Marionette, "so back to that town I go. I ought to be there before dark. Now Orlando has had a good feed and rest he should not be long upon the homeward journey."

Nor was he, for refreshed by a good feed of corn and a nice rest, the mule swung along at a fine pace. In a wonderfully short time they had passed the " Silver Fish " and were emerging upon the wild heath land. The sun was setting, but there was only another six or seven miles to go. They had covered about half of this distance when right ahead of him Mr. Marionette caught sight of a moving object on the white dusty road that caused him instantly to increase his pace. It was nothing more nor less than the overloaded little donkey cart of the elusive Finney, the showman himself perched on the top of his swaying load, trying in vain to urge his donkey to a faster pace.

Seeing his quarry apparently within his grasp, Mr. Marionette could not resist giving a yell of triumph.

" View hullo ! " he bawled, and Finney, looking back over his shoulder in terror, saw his enemy was almost upon him.

With renewed vigour he started to belabour his poor little beast. Panic seized upon Finney, although he knew he had not got the stolen box of dolls with him, and that if Mr. Marionette searched his cart through he would find no evidence to prove that he was the thief, yet his one thought was to escape his pursuer. The

terrible fear of the hunted gripped him. You know how even in a game of hide-and-seek to be pursued fills your whole being with terror; so it was with Finney. To escape, to evade his pursuer, was his one thought.

On the open high road he had no chance, so he swung the donkey round into a deep sandy lane, on the right hand side, that cut across the heath in the direction of the marsh lands. It was steep, and it was bumpy, but if the donkey was slow, he was at least sure-footed. In the gathering twilight Finney hoped against hope that Mr. Marionette might not have seen him turn off the high road. But, alas for his hopes! As he reached the foot of the steep lane he saw the white form of the mule turn into it. Now if Mr. Marionette had not at that moment been struck with the comic side of the situation, he must in under five minutes have overtaken the thief. But unfortunately (or fortunately, as you choose to look at it) Mr. Marionette had a very keen sense of humour, and suddenly the ridiculous picture of Finney clinging on to his rocking Punch and Judy box, and gazing askance over his shoulder at his pursuer, so overcame him that he positively rocked in his saddle with laughter.

Orlando, not knowing what was happening

to his master, stood still in his astonishment, which just gave old Finney a few minutes' respite. Seizing upon this chance, and beating his donkey with renewed vigour, he succeeded in putting a hundred yards or so between himself and his pursuer.

With a sigh of relief he turned a corner of the lane, only to find himself confronted with a fresh difficulty. Right in front of him across the lane was a wide and deep stream. Here was bad luck indeed! He had forgotten this particular stream which ran into the marsh lands. The water would reach up to the top of the donkey's legs. Could he force it through the stream? There was hope that this same obstacle might baffle his enemy. Some mules hated water. If only he could get his donkey across, the stream might, after all, prove a blessing in disguise. Wild with fear Finney forced his donkey into the water. A foot forward, two feet. Then the donkey stood, immovable! No amount of beating would make him budge. Finney perched on the top of the Punch and Judy box was stranded in mid-stream. Looking round wildly over his shoulder he saw the white form of Orlando turning the corner. With the concentrated energy of despair, Finney rained blows upon the motionless ass. Even the most patient of beasts has a

limit to what it will endure with meekness. With deadly intent the donkey stood upon its front legs and kicked not once but many times ! The cart swayed—the Punch and Judy box rocked violently. The donkey kicked again, harder this time. The Punch and Judy box fell sideways, and head over heels into the stream fell red-headed Finney.

This spectacle sent Mr. Marionette off again into peals of laughter ; he even slid from his saddle to enjoy it to the full.

" Ha ! ha ! ha ! " he roared. " Ha ! ha ! ha ! " and Finney crawling out on to the far side of the stream, dripping and bedraggled, shook his fist threateningly at the figure rocking with merriment.

Regardless of the donkey and his wrecked cart, Finney scurried off into the twilight, leaving a trail of wet along the sandy lane.

" Ho ! ho ! ho ! " chuckled Mr. Marionette, wiping the moisture from his eyes and trying to stop laughing, " the funniest sight I've ever seen in all my life. Oh, dear ! I shall never forget it ! but I must attend to his poor little beast. Come on, Orlando, we must get that little ass out of his difficulties."

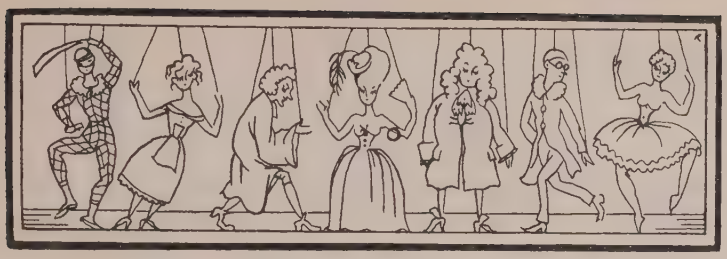
Orlando had no fear of the water, and by his example and Mr. Marionette's kind and gentle

persuasion, the donkey was at last safely landed on the other side of the stream, still harnessed to the remains of the cart. The Punch and Judy box had next to be rescued, for Mr. Marionette had pity on *his* enemy and did not want to see him deprived of his only means of livelihood.

All this took some time, and it was nearly dark when Mr. Marionette again mounted Orlando to continue the chase.

"There is not much chance now," he said to himself, "of my running that Red Fox to earth, though I am on four legs and he is on two. I do not know all these paths and by-lanes as he seems to do, and soon we shall be on the treacherous marsh lands. I have proved, at least, that my stolen puppets are not on his cart; what then do I gain by chasing the man any longer?"

But in spite of all these excellent arguments to the contrary, Mr. Marionette knew he would never rest till he had captured his quarry. The fever of the hunter was upon him, and he knew he would never rest till he had tracked the Red Fox to his lair.



CHAPTER FIVE

"What happened in Upper Lanthorn Square"

WILLO, so pale and slight, and yet so determined, threaded his way, lantern in hand, in and out of the queer tangle of little back streets, courtyards, alleys and waterways that formed the poorest part of Queer Town. All that crowded but picturesque quarter, that fell steeply to the quay side. For Queer Town was built on a hill, with its grandest part on the summit. There the great lords and ladies, the Lord Mayor and the Court dignitaries had their houses. The shops and market-places were on the slope of the hill, and all the crowded, busiest quarter overhung the river and the quay. Here, in some parts the byways were so steep that an alley might often end in a flight of steps.

Besides these narrow streets and byways, there was a network of waterways, sort of miniature canals, all of which threaded the lower part of the town, and emptied themselves into the Wonderway river. These canals were not muddy or dirty-looking, but always a bright clear blue, reflecting the sky above them, and very transparent and clean ; for the people of Queer Town were strictly forbidden by law to throw their refuse upon the waters.

It was into this quarter, as difficult to follow as a maze, unless you were a native of the place, that Willo now penetrated, intent on helping his master, and picturing himself soon returning in triumph bringing with him the stolen box of dolls.

Now the only hope he had of tracing the box was to find the whereabouts of old Mother Toothey, Finney's mother, or, as some folks said, his grandmother. He tried to remember the instructions that Tom Tittler had given him, but he felt a little mixed in his mind about them. He had been so impatient to be off that he had hardly given his full attention to them.

Now the one thing he felt sure about was the name, " Upper Lanthorn Square," but though he had found several likely-looking squares down by the quay, they seemed to have no

names over them, and on investigating them further, he had followed wrong paths and found himself in a complete tangle of byways, flights of steps and narrow alleys.

Finally, after much questioning of passers-by, he had returned to the quay side, and was beginning his search all over again. At last he stumbled upon the right square, he was sure of it, as an old wrought-iron lanthorn hung above the archway leading into it. He penetrated into it and found the flight of steps the "Tom Tit" had described, leading into the smaller square above. This was surrounded by very high old houses, sombre and gloomy-looking. There was no one to ask, and all the houses seemed so incredibly ancient, that it seemed impossible to fix on the oldest.

Now Willo was on the spot, the pedlar's instructions seemed to be coming back to him. Then a ragged, unhappy-looking little girl, furtive and sly, slipped out of one of the tumble-down doorways like a water-rat slipping out of its reedy home.

"Oh, please," called Willo after her, "can you tell me where old Mother Toothey lives?"

The little girl, apparently too frightened to speak, just shook her head. Willo remembering he had one large sugar-plum left in his pocket,

handed it to her, hoping it might loosen her tongue. She took it timidly, rather as though she expected some trick was being played on her, popped it into her mouth, but still said nothing. Willo, rather disappointed at the result of his sacrifice, for he had been saving up that sugar-plum for himself as a special treat, began again in rather annoyed tones. "Mother Toothey. You *must* know her, she lives in a top attic somewhere in this square. The Punch and Judy man comes to see her here. Do you know Finney?" But the shy little girl only shook her head more vehemently than ever, while still munching at that delectable plum.

Willo was just turning away in despair, when he remembered the pedlar. He had not yet tried the effect of *his* name upon the little girl.

"Do you know the pedlar?" he asked, "him they call Tom Tit? he stays in the same house sometimes." At last the little girl's face brightened up a trifle, and she started nodding her head instead of shaking it, which was quite encouraging. Then pointing back to the doorway from which she had just come, said:

"Yes, Mr. Tom Tit bides here, in the next room to us, but he ain't here now, he's on the roads. But I've never heard tell of Mother Toothey, no never," and started shaking her

head again, as though glad to return to that movement once more. Then once again repeating, "No never I ain't," she ran down the steps out of the square.

"I shall try this house, though," thought Willo. "If Tom Tit lives here it *must* be the right one," and rather fearfully he plunged into the dark and dirty doorway. On he went, up the long flight of stone stairs, worn and blackened with age; up, and up, past four landings and many doors, for the pedlar had said the old woman lived at the very tip top, "like a crow in its nest."

When he had reached the highest story he stopped and looked round. There were three doors on this landing, all shut, and the only sound to be heard was heavy snoring coming from behind one of them.

"Perhaps, if she's *very* old, she sleeps most of her life," he thought, and knocked at the door from behind which the snores sounded. No reply—but louder snores. He turned the handle and peeped in. On a low bed in the corner lay a disagreeable-looking old man with a white beard thrust forward and a blue nightcap which had slipped sideways over one eye. A black cat lying in front of a small smoky fire raised its back, spitting at Willo, with such an

evil glint in its eye that he retreated hastily, closing the door softly behind him. That was not the right room anyway. He then tried the next door, first knocking, and then turning the handle, but it was locked, and so were the other two. If Mother Toothey was behind any of them, she made no sound.

What was he to do now ? He was just giving up his quest in despair when he noticed a ladder-like flight of steep wooden steps leading up to some sort of loft or attic room. Perhaps it was up there ! That was a " crow's nest " indeed !

But how could any ancient woman ever get up and down those steep steps ? With his heart beating fast and his hands wet with nervousness, Willo started to climb those steps.

Before he reached the top he heard a voice speaking, a high, cracked, quavering voice, and this is what it was saying.

" There you are, you fine lady ! You stand there—but *you* are a bad boy, *you* are, I will put *you* in the corner."

Willo knocked at the ricketty door at the top of the steps. There was no answer, so he pushed it open and walked in. This is what he saw. The tiny attic was lighted only by a skylight. In one corner was a very old bed with a torn blanket

on it. There was one small wooden child's chair with a broken back. A heap of old rags and a pan or two in one corner. In the middle of the floor, as absorbed in her game as any child, sat a shrivelled up tiny old woman. Her face was all yellow and shrunken. Her mouth, from which protruded two long black teeth, was fallen in. A few wisps of grey hair were all that covered her yellow skull. Crouched on the floor, she looked scarcely larger than a child of six, indeed very little larger than the wooden figures with which she was playing. For surrounding her on the floor, their dresses soiled and torn, but otherwise whole and unharmed, were Mr. Marionette's precious puppets, his dear "Little People," found at last! Forgetting all his fears now, and overpowered with joy, Willo with a shout of triumph bounded into the room.

"Hurrah!" he cried, "found! found at last. Hurrah, I've found the marionettes!"

The poor shrivelled up old woman gave a cry of terror, and seizing as many of the dolls as she could hold in her arms, scuttled like a frightened rabbit under the bed.

It would have been a funny sight if it had not, too, been a pathetic one. Willo, too intent on his master's affairs to see either fun or sadness in

the old woman's action, but only a further effort to avoid capture and punishment, plunged down on his hands and knees after her, and dragged the old woman, whimpering and dirty, from under the bed.

"They are not *your* puppets," he said, with angry emphasis, "they are ours. Old Finney stole them. Did he give them to you? Are you his mother?"

At the mention of the word "Finney" the horrible-looking old woman seemed more terrified than ever. Shaking from head to foot so that the only teeth in her head rattled together, and holding out her skinny claw-like hands in supplication, she cried, in cracked and quavering tones:

"Don't tell him! Oh, don't go and tell Finney! It ain't my fault, I never touched the box." Then, pointing to the dolls, "they just walked out, they did!"

Now, although Mr. Marionette talked of his dolls as his "Little People," and appeared each night to make them live, Willo knew that they were only wooden figures really, and not understanding that the old woman had indeed reached second childhood, and *may* have believed her own words, only replied:

"That's a story—they can't walk," and without

another word started to collect the scattered dolls. Then he caught sight of the long wooden box in a corner, turned upside down, and began carefully to pack up the marionettes again in the exact order in which they always travelled.

He was kneeling on the floor intent upon his task, his back turned to the door, when he heard a wild scuffling, running sound below. Then steps hurrying up the attic stairs, and heavy panting breathing. With a wild terrified shriek of "Finney! it's him," the old crone once more dived under the bed. It seemed to be her favourite place of refuge from trouble.

Before Willo could collect his scattered wits, or realise what was happening, the door burst open, and wild, panting, dishevelled Finney, the Red Fox, floundered into the attic. His hat was gone, his coat dirty and torn, his red hair hung in dank masses round his face.

So wild with terror was he that he never even *saw* Willo crouched by the box of dolls in the corner.

"The ladder! the ladder!" he panted. "You wretch, where's the ladder?" Then snatching up a rope ladder from somewhere under the heap of rags, he flung it up towards the skylight.

Willo thought he must have gone clean mad; but evidently the Punch and Judy man knew

what he was about, for it caught on two hooks fixed in the ceiling, apparently for that purpose. And, agile as a cat, Finney scuttled up the rungs and began pushing at the skylight window, but before he had succeeded in opening it, for it had evidently not been opened for some time, again the attic door burst open, this time to admit none other than Mr. Marionette himself.

He, too, was hatless and panting, but with a broad grin upon his face as though the whole chase was the greatest sport. He stared round the room. Willo pointed upwards to where the Red Fox had just succeeded in forcing the skylight window.

With a wild "View hullo!" of triumph, Willo's master jumped at the swinging ladder, and hand over fist followed the Red Fox, up, up, but before he could seize upon his quarry, Finney had disappeared through the skylight out on to the roof.

In a second Mr. Marionette was after him. Open-mouthed and breathless with amazement, Willo gazed up to where the two men had disappeared, like cats, upon the roof. The ladder still swung temptingly within his reach. Could any boy resist such an opportunity? He swung himself on to it, but before he had climbed a couple of feet, a pair of legs again appeared

through the trapdoor opening. They were the neat brown ones of Mr. Marionette.

Willo dropped to the ground and held the ladder taut for his master, but before descending he shut the window, fastening it firmly with the catch on the inside. Then climbing down he unhitched the rope ladder, and carefully brushing his dusty coat, remarked: "That's that." Then turning to Willo, whose presence he had only just realised, said: "So you're here, too! Good boy. And now to find my puppets."

"I've found them, master! Look, look!" cried Willo with joyous excitement, and leading his master up to the corner where he had neatly packed the dolls away in their box, pointed to them triumphantly.

"Splendid! splendid!" cried Mr. Marionette, "It's you who have found them, Willo, after all, but I at least have had my revenge on the thief. Oh! that Red Fox! how he ran!" and Mr. Marionette started chuckling to himself again at the thought of the chase.

"Oh, law! what a dance he led me over the marshes. I should have caught him up long ago but I was so helpless with laughter. Then when we got to the city the old rascal knows all its alleys and byways far better than I do. It was no good then pursuing him on Orlando. So I left

the mule tied up by the riverside and followed on foot. He thought he had dodged me finely by the Blue Canal, but I was only hiding in a doorway to recover my breath. I finally ran him to earth here, and I hope he's enjoying himself up on the roof there. Ha! ha!" he chuckled, "I gave him a capital drubbing up there, and left him clinging to a chimney-pot in the dark, and crying for mercy. He never showed any mercy to his poor little donkey. He won't get down in a hurry, as he will be too frightened to call out too loudly for help for fear the city guard should hear him. He's in no favour with those fellows, the old villain. So this is his lair, is it?" he went on, looking round with curiosity. "How did you track him down, Willo? You must tell me all your adventures later on, but now we had best be going. Fasten down the box and give it to me. You're a good clever boy, Willo, and I shall never forget the service you have done me."

Willo, glowing with pride at this high praise from his master, had packed in the last doll carefully, and was just going to fasten down the lid, when they were both startled by a loud piercing shriek which rang through the room. They turned to find the shrunken old woman just behind them. She had crept out from

underneath the bed, and now, with both arms stretched out in supplication, was wailing miserably in high-pitched quavering tones.

"No, no, no! Don't take them from me—my babies! No, no, no!"

"Oh, my hat! Whatever is it?" exclaimed Mr. Marionette, "is she human? Wherever did she come from?"

"From under the bed," explained Willo, in matter of fact tones. "I found her playing with your 'Little People' when I came in here, but when Finney burst in she was terrified and crept under the bed. I suppose she's his mother," the boy added as an afterthought.

"Mother! good gracious," exclaimed the showman, "more like his great-grandmother. Why I've never seen anyone so incredibly old and small in all my life. Poor old lady," he went on, "it seems almost cruel to take her toys from her, doesn't it now?" and he looked down at her doubtfully, rubbing his curly head, as he always did when perplexed.

"Cruel!" exclaimed Willo, indignantly, "why it's they who have been cruel and wicked to steal your beautiful puppets, master. I think she's a nasty dirty old thing," he remarked dispassionately.

"*She* couldn't steal anything, the poor old

soul," said Mr. Marionette; "why she hasn't the wits or the strength. Look here, Granny," he went on, "now I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you one of the puppets for a present, all for yourself. See, now here's a pretty one," and he chose out the smallest puppet, dressed as a fairy, and handed it to the queer little old woman.

With a cry of delight she hugged it in her arms and began singing it to sleep in high quavering tones, as pleased as any little girl with her first doll.

"Oh, master," exclaimed Willo, full of reproach, "how *could* you give away that pretty one. They take you *such* a time to make, too, with all their separate joints and everything. She's such a horrid-looking old thing, too; why ever *did* you give it to her?"

"Hush, Willo," said his master, "that is my affair." Then holding up his finger, "Just listen," he said, "to what that old crone is chanting; she may be in her second childhood, but she knows more than we think."

Willo listened. The tiny shrivelled up old woman was sitting on the bed, the marionette, dressed in silver and gold tissue, clasped lovingly in her arms, and these were the words she was chanting:

Hush-a-bye, my baby, the Red Fox has fled,
Perhaps he's lying stiff up there, dead, dead, dead;
But if he comes we'll creep beneath the bed, bed, bed.

This strange song followed them as Willo and his master descended the steep attic stairs, carrying their rescued box of marionettes between them.

"I *do* think it's a pity you let her have that puppet," persisted Willo, "after all our trouble, too. Why *did* you, master?"

"Because there is always other trouble in the world besides your own, Willo," he said, "and it's generally more worth considering."

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